U.S. Atty. Gen. Bell May Offer a Deal To James Earl Ray

Press-Scimitar 2/25/77

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WASHINGTON. — Attorney General Griffin B. Bell wants to question Martin Luther King assassin James Earl Ray and possibly offer him a deal to tell where he got the money to flee the country and elude authorities for more than two months.

Bell said he would like to "interrogate and negotiate" with Ray if it is O.K. with officials of Tennessee, where Ray is a state prisoner for the 1968 shooting of the black civil rights leader.

The attorney general said he has long been interested in finding out where and how Ray got thousands of dollars, three false passports and two automobiles prior to being arrested in London. The mystery is a prime source of suspicion in the minds of many Americans who believe Ray did not act alone.

"If I concluded he was ready to make a clean breast of it," Bell told a group of reporters yesterday, "then I might consider recommending to Tennessee authorities that he be given some consideration."

Ray, 48, is serving a 99-year term for the murder to which he pleaded guilty.

An investigation ordered by Bell's predecessor, Edward H. Levi, concluded in a report published this month that Ray acted alone in the rifle slaying of Dr. King in Memphis on April 4, 1968. The report made no conclusion about Ray's financial resources following the assassination, when Ray fled to Portugal and then to England where he was arrested on June 8.

However, a Justice Department lawyer involved in the 10-month probe said investigators have "excellent indications of where the money came from." He said Ray's former fellow inmates report he had a lucrative drug and loan shark business while in Missouri State Prison from 1960 to 1967, when he escaped. The investigation added that a number of unsolved bank robberies bore Ray's trademark.

The task force decided not to speculate in its report that these were possible sources of Ray's funds because there is no "positive proof," the lawyer said.

Previous efforts to question Ray about the money were rejected by both Ray and his lawyer, the task force member said.

The Justice Department lawyer said Bell is "obsessed" with the Ray case "because our review does not agree with his long-held suspicions." The investigator added that anyone who insists on talking to Ray at this time "proceeds on the premise of relative ignorance."

Nevertheless, Bell seems intent on proceeding. He said he would like to question Ray personally or have it done by one of his "most trusted" officials in the Justice Department.

"I'd like to have a tight case," Bell said, "and this one has a gap in it."

The attorney general said his inquiry might have to wait until Congress decides if it will pursue, and to what extent, its own wider investigation of the King assassination.

In a one-hour meeting with reporters, Bell also defended his and President Carter's choice of Pittsburgh Mayor Pete Flaherty to be deputy attorney general in charge of criminal matters. Flaherty had been Carter's biggest name supporter in the crucial Pennsylvania primary, and also played a leading role in his election campaign.

Bell said Flaherty prosecuted hundreds of cases during six years of service as an assistant state prosecutor and, more important, has the kind of administrative experience the new attorney general wants.

"He's considered one of the best mayors in the country," Bell said. "In eight years he never raised taxes, and he reduced personnel 25 per cent."